Urban Rivers Restoration Pilot Fact Sheet
Blackstone-Woonasquatucket Rivers and Communities, MA and RI

Background - For the last 200 years, the Blackstone and Woonasquatucket Rivers supported industries which used the waters for disposal of untreated discharges. At the time, people had little understanding of the impact of the contamination on human health and the environment. In the last 30 years, one study found the Blackstone to be "grossly polluted with heavy metals" (Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, 1981), which was directly linked to the loss of fish and the degradation of wildlife habitat. The Woonasquatucket, in the meantime, was found to contain actionable levels of dioxin in sediments and surface water, which have necessitated warnings against swimming in and eating fish from the lower section of the Woonasquatucket. The population of the Blackstone and Woonasquatucket Rivers watershed area is 1 million people. Both rivers present an extraordinary range of environmental and economic conditions from pristine rural landscapes to densely populated urban neighborhoods to historic business districts.

Current Activities - **As an urban rivers restoration pilot, the Blackstone and Woonasquatucket American Heritage Rivers seek to showcase partnerships not only between the US EPA and the Army Corps of Engineers but also with the state departments of environment, chambers of commerce, tourism councils, and private non-profit environmental groups.** Some of the specifics of the partnership include efforts to restore freshwater wetlands, the first effort of its kind in Rhode Island; reduce the contaminant load into the Narragansett Bay from the Blackstone and Woonasquatucket Rivers; connect the permit work along the rivers for economic restoration of brownfields, bike paths river access, and at wastewater and hydro-electric facilities.

If restoration of these rivers to Class B fishable and swimable rivers is to be achieved by the year 2015 (Blackstone) and 2020 (Woonasquatucket), then the key partners must seek cleanup of the urban stretches of these rivers beyond combined sewer overflow (CSO) and storm water improvements.

Authority and Funding – The Blackstone River Watershed feasibility study was initiated in May 1999 in partnership with the Massachusetts Executive Office of Environmental Affairs. It received $140,000 in the FY03 Energy and Water Development Appropriation. Several private, non-profit organizations are funding projects dealing with exploring options for fish passage on the Blackstone, design of wetland restoration, creating an inventory of opportunities for riparian buffer restoration. The US EPA, meanwhile, has funded brownfields assessments and cleanup of Superfund sites along these rivers.

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Feb. 26, 2003